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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 004482

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SUBJECT: MEETING WITH SYRIA'S RIAD SEIF, DAMASCUS-BEIRUT
DECLARATION SIGNATORY RELEASED

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: A/DCM met with Damascus Declaration leader Riad Seif on September 12, just shortly before the attack on the U.S. Embassy. Seif said he had chosen to stop reporting to the security services and was traveling outside the city, including to Homs to meet with recently released Damascus-Beirut Declaration signatory Mohammed Mahfoudh. The Damascus Declaration group is continuing its activities, including planning an organizational meeting later this month in Aleppo and reaching out to Syria's three main Kurdish parties that did not sign the Declaration. Seif stated that the UNIIIC investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafik Hariri continues to worry Syrian President Bashar al-Asad and regime figures. A comprehensive Middle East peace agreement would stem the rise in Islamists in Syria, where both the regime and the people have historically seen themselves as champions of the Palestinians, and it would facilitate broad democratic reforms here, Seif said. End Summary.

¶2. (C) REFUSAL TO REPORT TO SECURITY: In a meeting cut short by the September 12 attack on Embassy Damascus, A/DCM and Poloff met with Syria's Damascus Declaration leader and former Damascus Spring detainee Riad Seif in Seif's downtown office to discuss the political situation. Seif said that on September 3 he had issued a short statement detailing his treatment over the past eight months by Syrian security services and added that he had stopped reporting daily to their offices. "I made a calculation and decided that if they arrest me, maybe it's better," Seif said. "As the elected head of the Damascus Declaration, maybe it would give me more credibility in the eyes of Syrians." Since the statement, Syrian security were using much greater discretion in following him, said Seif, noting that he was traveling outside Damascus, including on September 11 to Homs to meet Damascus-Beirut Declaration signatory Mohammed Mahfoudh who was released from detention September 5.

¶3. (C) OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES: The Damascus Declaration group is continuing its activities, said Seif, noting the group is scheduled to meet in late September in Aleppo to discuss next steps. There are also signs that the three main Syrian Kurdish groups that have not yet signed the Declaration might soon join, said Seif, citing his positive September 3 meeting with Syrian representatives of the Azadi and Yekiti parties and the Kurdish Future Movement. (Note: Poloff met September 7 with the Future Movement representative who denied his group's intent to join the Damascus Declaration. End Note.) Seif acknowledged that the

Damascus Declaration does not meet one of the Kurdish groups' main demands since it fails to call directly for citizenship rights for stateless Kurds. However, the establishment of democracy in Syria would be the first step in that process, Seif claimed.

¶4. (C) HARIRI INVESTIGATION: Seif stated the UNIIIC investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafik Hariri continues to pose a threat to Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, with the recent al-Arabiyya interview showing Syrian witness Mohammed Zuheir Siddiq repeating earlier accusations that Asad was behind the killing. Additionally, Seif said he was further convinced of the regime's involvement when a trustworthy confident recently told him that Syrian Defense Minister Lt. Gen. Hassan Ali Turkmani met in early 2005, prior to the assassination, with alleged Syrian suicide bomber and Islamist Ahmad Abu Adass, urging that "now is the time to stand with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad." (Note: Shortly after the Hariri assassination, Adass was pictured in a videotape released to al-Jazira, confessing to the assassination with a suicide bomb. He has not been seen since.)

¶5. (C) RISE IN ISLAM: In response to a question, Seif said that the rising influence of Islam throughout the region and in Syria was at least indirectly connected to U.S. policies, particularly in regards to the Palestinians. A comprehensive solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict would put an end to the rise of Islamist influence here--some of it fundamentalist in orientation--and throughout the region, Seif predicted. A Middle East peace agreement would also stem the rise in Islam in Syria, where both the regime and the people have historically seen themselves as champions of the Palestinians, and it would facilitate broad democratic

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reforms, Seif said. Syrians and the rest of the Arab world cheered on Hizballah's success in its conflict with Israel last month because, for the first time, they saw an Arab actor that was able to stand up to Israel and the U.S. and maintain Arab dignity, Seif said. Hizballah's weak point in the eyes of the Syrian Sunni majority is that the movement is Shi'a, Seif said.

¶6. (C) Comment: Throughout the conversation, Seif, who speaks fluent English learned in prison, seemed subdued but focused. Despite comments to Poloff by other opposition activists critical of Seif, the head of the Damascus Declaration group seems to be pursuing a careful course designed to continue the organization's activities in the narrow margins left to it by the regime. Seif repeatedly returned to the idea that a Middle East peace deal would greatly facilitate democratic reforms in Syria and regionally. The meeting with Seif was cut short when his wife (herself a Palestinian who works near the Embassy) called to report an explosion and gunshots at the U.S. Embassy about a mile away. Seif allowed A/DCM to use the office to make phone calls and offered all assistance at his disposal.

CORBIN